

Supporting Your Immune System with Food: Essential Nutrients for Immune System Function

By Annie Henry

For the average healthy person, it's easy to avoid thinking about illness until, all of a sudden, it creeps up on you. Be it a manageable cold or a winter flu that kicks you on your but, it is only until we are struck down by those viruses that we start paying attention to our immune system. Unfortunately, by the time we notice that our immune system is being challenged, it is too late. The virus enters our body long before symptoms arrive. Once we are aware of those pathogenic attackers, our immune system is already working hard to fight them off.

Although we can take steps when we start feeling sick to help our immune system, the most effective actions we can take to support our immune system need to happen before we get sick. Yes, I am talking about preventative medicine. Some of us choose to take a load of supplements each day as part of our preventative health routine, but this isn't necessary for most people. To keep your immune system in tip-top shape, there are a few things you can do each and every day without having to go down the supplement rabbit hole. Today, I'll be discussing one of them: diet.

Your Diet's Role in Immune System Function

[Diet plays a large role in our immune systems' ability to function properly.](#) One way in which our diet supports the functioning of our immune system is by providing essential nutrients. Proper nutrition is critical to supporting immune system functions that help our body fight off environmental pathogens, such as viruses and bacteria.

These essential nutrients for immune system function include certain amino acids, vitamin A, folic acid, vitamin B6, vitamin B12, vitamin C, vitamin E, zinc, copper, and iron. Without these nutrients, critical immune system functions can be suppressed, leaving our bodies more susceptible to pathogens and illness. (2)

Although dietary supplements may be necessary for those who suffer from nutrient deficiencies, you do not need to spend an arm and a leg on expensive supplements to support your immune system. For most people, to support your immune system, you just need a well-balanced diet that encompasses all those lovely nutrients we talked about. Consulting a nutritionist would be the best way to build a well-rounded diet that fits *your* specific dietary needs.

Sources of Essential Nutrients to Support Your Immune System

That being said, for those of you looking for the simple answer, here's an (incomplete) list of nutrient-rich foods that support your immune system:

Amino acids: Amino acids are organic compounds that are said to be the "building blocks" of proteins. They are important to many functions of the body, including blood pressure and

appetite regulation, metabolism, and the immune system. Amino acids are found in a variety of foods—including meat, dairy products, eggs, seafood, nuts, seeds, legumes, and other grains and plants—but not all foods contain all essential amino acids, so make sure you include a variety of these foods in your diet. (1)

Vitamin A: In addition to supporting the immune system, vitamin A is also important to your vision and reproduction. Vitamin A can be found in fish oils, liver, milk, eggs, carrots, broccoli, squash, and cantaloupe. (2)

Folic Acid: Folic acid is a form of folate, which is one of the many B vitamins. Folate can be found in vegetables including asparagus, spinach, mustard greens, and brussel sprouts. It is also found in nuts, beans, peas, and oranges. (3)

Vitamin B6: Vitamin B6, in addition to supporting the immune system, helps your body break down nutrients and supports brain health. It can be found in salmon, tuna, beef liver, poultry, bananas, papayas, oranges, cantaloupe, chickpeas, and dark greens. (4)

Vitamin B12: Along with immune system function, vitamin B12 supports nerve and blood health. B12 is found naturally in animal products—including fish, red meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products—which is why those eating a plant-based diet should be sure to supplement their diet with B12. Nutritional yeast is an alternative, vegan-friendly source of B12. (5)

Vitamin C: Most well-known for its immune system benefits, vitamin C also helps your body absorb iron and is an antioxidant. Vitamin C is famously found in citrus fruits, including oranges and grapefruit. You can also get it from red and green peppers, kiwifruit, and strawberries. (6)

Vitamin E: Vitamin E helps your immune system fight off pathogens. It is also an antioxidant. The best sources of vitamin E include nuts and vegetable oils: including almonds, peanuts, hazelnuts, sunflower oil, safflower oil, and wheat germ oil. (7)

Zinc: Zinc is vital to the growth and development of infants and children. It also plays a role in your body's wound-healing processes, smelling, and tasting. Your body also needs zinc to make DNA and proteins. The best natural source of zinc is oysters. Other seafood, such as crab and lobster, are also good sources of zinc. If you're not a fan of seafood, you can find zinc in dairy products, red meat, poultry, beans, nuts, and whole grains. (8)

Copper: Your body uses copper to make energy, maintain the nervous system, and activate genes. It is also an important mineral for the health of your immune system. Copper is found in beef liver, nuts and seeds—including cashews, sunflower seeds, and sesame seeds—chocolate, whole-grain products, potatoes, mushrooms, avocados, chickpeas, and tofu.

Iron: Iron is essential to the production of red blood cells that transport oxygen throughout the body. It also plays a role in hormone development. Iron is found in lean meat, poultry, white beans, spinach, seafood, kidney beans, peas, raisins, and some nuts. (10)

Deficiencies in the above nutrients can affect the health and function of your immune system. For those with such deficiencies, supplementation may be necessary. However, generally speaking, it is possible to get all the nutrients your immune system needs by eating a well-rounded diet.

References

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